



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR MUDGEERABA

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RESIDENTIAL SERVICES [ACCOMMODATION] BILL

Mrs REILLY (Mudgeeraba—ALP) (3.45 p.m.): I am happy to rise in support of the Residential Services (Accommodation) Bill. I begin by commending the minister and all those involved in the preparation of this bill for their continued commitment to protecting the interests of tenants of privately run boarding houses, supported accommodation and aged persons rental complexes. Some 8,000 people in Queensland live in such accommodation and they are the most marginalised and vulnerable members of our society and the ones to whom we have the greatest responsibility. As other members have described, many of these residents are ageing, alone, have psychiatric or intellectual disabilities and very low incomes. The Beattie government has been concerned for some time about the standards of accommodation and service provision in this sector. This bill is part of a legislative package to regulate, for the first time, the private sector residential services industry.

In June 2000 the Premier established the Hostel Industry Task Force to look at practical solutions to address some of the exploitation and discrepancies of service in this sector. The task force developed a strategy of legislative reforms supported by resident support measures and industry assistance in response to these issues to better regulate the sector. As a result of this process, complementary legislation has been developed with the Residential Services (Accreditation) Bill and the State Housing and Other Acts Amendment Bill, the next bill to be debated. The proposed regulation of boarding houses, supported accommodation and aged rental accommodation will provide, for the first time, improved conditions, safety and wellbeing for residents.

I do want to say, however, that I have some concerns about aspects of the bill and have discussed these with the minister. I am concerned about the ability of some residents of these hostels and boarding houses to understand the provisions of this legislation and indeed to understand that they do have rights regarding their accommodation and that they can fight to maintain these rights. As I have said, the majority of these people are ageing or incapacitated to some extent. They have varying degrees of intellectual disability, mental illness or psychiatric illness and, for many reasons, are weak and vulnerable. There are many who have low levels of literacy and could easily be taken advantage of by unscrupulous operators who have prepared a written agreement which may not have the resident's best interests, rights and responsibilities clearly outlined. However, because these people may be desperate for a place to live, they may be forced into signing something that they do not understand or cannot even read.

People with a mild intellectual disability are, in the main, very trusting and gullible and are not likely to be suspicious of a service provider who as far as they can see is providing them with a roof over their head and, in some cases, regular meals. Therefore, the provisions for written agreements in notifications, while a vast improvement, still leave me somewhat nervous. However, I am not prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I have no doubt indeed that this bill does provide the most protection and safeguards that these residents have ever had in this state.

I fully understand and support the need for this legislation to be balanced to protect both the residents and the service providers. We do not want to see a situation where service providers cannot evict a resident who may be disturbing, threatening, abusing or bullying the other residents. We also do not want to see service providers so burdened that they abandon the field altogether and give up and close down the facility, forcing even more people into homelessness. This bill and the previous bill debated today provide a very good balance and a very practical balance of legislation.

Over the next two years I will be watching with great interest, as I know will be many other community organisations, advocates and others, to see how the legislation is working. I look forward at that time to seeing the results of the review. There is no doubt that this legislation is desperately needed and that it will provide safety and safeguards for the first time. I am satisfied that the minister has considered these matters and balanced them with the need for practical management of these facilities. I am satisfied that the necessary safeguards as outlined by the member for Kallangur earlier, such as the presence of a police officer at any attempt at eviction and an appeals process for people who are evicted, are included in this bill.

This is great Labor legislation. I am pleased to see the members opposite support it and also make public their desire to protect the weak and marginalised in our society—I always knew they had it in them, notwithstanding the fact the National Party had over 20 years in government to introduce such important legislation. Of course, only a Labor government would dare think about supporting and protecting those in our society who are at most disadvantage. I say to the non-government members who spoke with such genuine concern for the sick, the poor, the weak and the exploited—please make those thoughts known to your federal government colleagues. Tell the Howard government how you feel, join with us and lobby, lobby, lobby. Be serious, put your money where your mouth is and fight, fight, fight, because it is these very people who this morally bereft federal government seems determined to throw on the scrap heap.

If members opposite do not believe me, wait until next week's federal budget, a budget which will sacrifice the most vulnerable people in our society, people with disabilities, in the name of defence and detention. In next week's federal budget it is likely that some \$18 million in funding earmarked for unmet need in the disability sector, over \$100 million Australia wide, will be funnelled off to fight asylum seekers, the world's most wretched, poor and victimised people, people this federal government has chosen to demonise and exploit for base political purposes. 'Kick them when they are down'—that is National Party, Liberal Party and federal coalition policy. If members opposite are genuine, beg and plead with John Howard and Peter Costello not to abandon the 16 per cent of people in our community, those with disabilities. If members opposite—and I see a lot of them in the chamber this afternoon—are genuinely party to a federal coalition government, they should tell their Prime Minister that they are ashamed of his government, his approach and his cynical spending on border protection and they should spurn his stone-cold heart.

That is the challenge to the newest member of the National Party, the new left of the National Party as the member for Algester said. That is the challenge I throw to this new frontbench member, the former Independent member for the Darling Downs. The member should prove his sincerity or forever be damned as a false pretender by his silence. The member can be sure that I will be fighting for that money and the money that has been siphoned off from public housing. I will be fighting for these people and will certainly ask my federal Gold Coast members, Margaret May and Stephen Ciobo, to show me how they can justify this disgusting, despicable, deplorable act. I commend this bill to the House.
